

U. S. ARMY CHAPLAIN CENTER AND SCHOOL

THE INFLUENCE OF BLACK MUSLIMS ON THE CONCEPT OF  
BLACK NATIONALISM IN AMERICA

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of Nationalism as an ideology has developed into a subject of major proportions among sociologists and historians in this century. Black Nationalism has been the focus of a great deal of study, both concerning African Black Nationalism and American Black Nationalism. While I was finishing my research on this project, I watched a special TV-program on "Black Pride" (WPIX-TV, Channel 11, NY), in which a family told of how their concept of identity is related to Africa and Swahili language, and how they teach their children to observe African national customs of dress, mythology, holidays, and eating habits. My area of interest is the Black Muslim<sup>1</sup> movement's influence on this concept in America. My approach will be historical, and I acknowledge a great deal of dependency on C. Eric Lincoln's book, The Black Muslims in America, Revised Edition.

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<sup>1</sup>The title "Black Muslims" for the "Nation of Islam" was coined by C. Eric Lincoln in his book, The Black Muslims in America first published in 1961 by Beacon Press.

## CHAPTER II

### BACKGROUND OF BLACK NATIONALISM IN AMERICA

First, in order to see the Black Muslim influence on Black Nationalism in America, it is necessary to look at the background of Nationalism in this country. There are two apparent antecedent movements which bear similarities to the Muslims, one political and the other religious. Sydney E. Ahlstrom describes these two influences.<sup>1</sup>

The Universal Negro Improvement Association was founded by Marcus Garvey and given the motto, "One God! One Aim! One Destiny!" The purpose of this organization was "to awaken the self-esteem of blacks everywhere and to redeem Africa for all Africans at home and abroad."<sup>2</sup> Garvey recruited numbers of blacks in America from 1916 to 1923. Though he was deported in 1927 because of frauds, Garvey had awakened a sense of African nationalism among blacks in the cities. The group-consciousness he aroused among blacks and the sense of alienation from the white culture showed the great appeal of nationalism, and produced numerous smaller groups follow-

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<sup>1</sup>Sydney E. Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 1066-1067.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

ing the same theme. Black Muslims thus see this movement as one of their precursors.<sup>1</sup>

The other more religious group which influenced the Black Muslims perhaps more directly was the Moorish Science Temple of America, founded in 1913 by Timothy Drew, a North Carolinian. Drew wanted to abandon the name "Negro", preferring a name connoting Asiatic origins, "Moorish Americans" or simply "Moors".<sup>2</sup> He took the name Noble Prophet Ali Drew, later being called simply Noble Drew Ali. Drew published The Holy Koran, a book containing Islamic, Christian, Garveyite passages, and Drew's own interpretations. The movement flourished best in Chicago, but violence came into the organization in 1929 when one of Drew's deputies was murdered, followed not long after by Drew himself.

Thus these two organizations were destined to wane in influence due to either the death or deportation of their leader.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE EMERGENCE OF THE BLACK MUSLIMS

The struggle for a new leader of Black Nationalism found a challenger in Wallace D. Fard, who appeared mysteriously in Detroit in 1930, claiming to be the reincarnation of Drew, and a sometime visitor to Mecca.<sup>1</sup> Not much is known about W. D. Fard, later called W. F. Muhammad.<sup>2</sup> He may have been Arab, but in any case he claimed to be the incarnation of Allah. "The Prophet" Fard moved quietly within the Black community in Detroit as a peddler, selling raincoats and silks, and offering freedom, justice, and equality.<sup>3</sup> Before Fard's mysterious disappearance in late 1933 or early 1934 he established the first Temple of Islam in Detroit with a membership estimated at eight thousand. Another temple was founded in Chicago with one of his most trusted lieutenants, Robert Poole (later renamed Elijah Muhammad), taking charge.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>C. Eric Lincoln, The Black Muslims in America, Revised Edition (New York: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 75.

<sup>3</sup>Theodore Draper, The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), p. 73.

<sup>4</sup>Ahlstrom, pp. 1067-1068.

Theodore Draper concludes that Fard posited a clearly nationalistic doctrine "addressed to a nation — the 'Nation of Islam'."<sup>1</sup> Members of this nation were not Americans and were to be associated with American institutions as little as possible. Draper describes this "nation":

They were citizens of the Holy City of Mecca, not American citizens. Their flag was the Moslem flag, not the American flag. Their children belonged in the University of Islam, not in American schools. They were not obliged to obey the American Constitution or serve in American armed forces.<sup>2</sup>

Following the disappearance of W. D. Fard, Elijah Muhammad assumed the role of leader in the Black Muslim movement as the "Messenger of Allah".<sup>3</sup> Quoting from Elijah Muhammad's book, Message to the Blackman in America, Draper shows the attitude of nationalism which is held by the Muslims:

We are a Nation in a nation....We want to build a nation that will be recognized as a nation, that will be self-respecting and receive respect of the other nations of the earth....We must understand the importance of land to our nation. The first and most important reason that the individual countries of Europe, Africa, and Asia are recognized as nations is because they occupy a specific area of the earth.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of nationalism is further expressed in at least two of the ten propositions which are printed in each issue of the Muslim newspaper, Muhammad Speaks. Number four states: "We want our people in America, whose parents or grandparents were descendants from slaves, to be allowed

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<sup>1</sup>Draper, p. 75.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 80-81.

to establish a separate territory of their own...."(Italics mine). And in Number Five we read: "We want every black man and woman to have the freedom to accept or reject being separated from the slavemaster's children and establish a land of their own...."(Italics mine).<sup>1</sup>

As to where the land should be for this nation, Muhammad has left some confusion. As Draper points out, Muhammad has suggested at least three and perhaps four solutions: one would be to return to their "native land", which could only mean Asia or Africa; another would be to establish a separate state on the American continent or somewhere else; a third proposal would be to take over three or four of the American states. The fourth is a suggestion that the White people in the Western Hemisphere return to Europe.<sup>2</sup>

The goals of the Black Muslim movement as defined by C. Eric Lincoln in a section from his book further illustrate the concept of nationalism which is a key part of the Muslim teachings. Though, as he sees it, the ends of the organization are the most illusive part of its doctrine, there seem to be four which are clear.<sup>3</sup> A United Front of Black Men is one of these purposes. This goal of Black Unity will bring together all levels of American black people. A second purpose is racial separation. The basis

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<sup>1</sup>Lincoln, pp. xxvii-xxviii.

<sup>2</sup>Draper, p. 83.

<sup>3</sup>Lincoln, pp. 86-102.



for this, while supposedly because of the teaching of the Muslims of Black supremacy, is aimed against the goal of many Whites and Blacks of integration. When the race is pure, then the Blacks of America will have true dignity and leadership among other Black nations of the world.<sup>1</sup> Economic separation is a third goal of the Black Muslims. The ideal is complete economic withdrawal from the White community. If this can be achieved then the goal of a Nation within a nation will be realized. In striving for this, the Muslims have established small businesses, such as bakeries, restaurants and other service establishments. Plans have been made for a hospital and a college in Chicago.<sup>2</sup> The fourth purpose which Lincoln lists is what he terms "Some Good Earth", and this was expressed in other terms, above. These ideals leave little doubt that the Nation of Islam expresses a form of Black Nationalism.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 92-93.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 96-98.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE INFLUENCE OF THE BLACK MUSLIMS ON BLACK NATIONALISM

This leads to the basic question, what influence have the Black Muslims had on Black Nationalism in America? This will be the subject of the remainder of this paper and I will deal both with the influence on the community and on certain key individuals.

There is, of course, the reaction of organized elements of the community to the Black Muslims, which Louis Lomax points out in his book, The Negro Revolt. Black clergymen see the Muslims as having shaken the Negro Christian community because of their preaching against ineffective religion, and because of the strong emphasis on the supremacy of the Black man.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Lomax says that since Black Muslims present indisputable facts about life for the Black man in America, every spokesman for the Negro in America must assume a more extreme position than he would otherwise. He concludes that the Black Muslims, representing an extreme reaction to the problem of being Negro in America today are a part of the Negro revolt.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Louis Lomax, The Negro Revolt, Revised Edition (New York: Perennial Library, Harper & Row, 1971), p. 188.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

The appeal of the Muslims has been to upwardly mobile lower-class Blacks, because of their Puritan ethic based on a four-fold program: "an explanation of their plight (white devils); a sense of pride and self-esteem (black superiority); a vision of a glorious future (black ascendancy; and a practical program of uplift (working hard, saving money, and uniting to create Negro enterprises and prosperity)".<sup>1</sup>

This supports the ideas expressed by Lincoln. He says, citing W. E. B. DuBois, that the appeal of any Black Nationalism, rests in the idea of a common suffering, which produces a defensive response to external forces — a response growing out of the desire to conserve cultural values and to escape oppressive conditions.<sup>2</sup> He further asserts that Black Nationalism finds its deepest roots in the lower class and its greatest strength among the young.<sup>3</sup> Five characteristics of the membership are suggested by Lincoln:

1. The membership is young. Up to 80 per cent of a typical congregation is between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five....
2. The membership is predominantly male....
3. The membership is essentially lower class....
4. The membership is almost wholly American — Blackamerican....
5. Finally, the membership is predominantly ex-Christian....

These ideas only describe some of the effects of the movement and are not a gauge of the actual influence in terms of numbers or attitudes. Membership is difficult to assess

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<sup>1</sup>August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, Black Protest in the Sixties (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Lincoln, p. 47. <sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 48-50.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 24-28.

because of the extreme secrecy of the organization, but estimates range from 50,000 to 100,000.<sup>1</sup> A published list of Mosques shows 51 locations in cities throughout the Nation.<sup>2</sup>

The best source for attitudes among Black Americans during the 1960's is a book entitled Report from Black America, by Peter Goldman.<sup>3</sup> He makes use of the results of a Gallup poll and compares them with the results of two other polls, all commissioned by Newsweek. The question that gets at the idea of the influence of the Black Muslims on the Black community was one in which a list of leaders and groups was read to individuals and they were asked to rate them as "excellent", "pretty good", "only fair", or "poor". On a plus and minus scale "excellent" and "pretty good" were considered as being approving, while "only fair" and "poor" were disapproving. In 1963 the Black Muslims were rated as 11% approving and 44% disapproving; in 1966 it was 9% versus 49%; and 1969 it was 13% to 48%. Only 4% in 1969 rated them as excellent. Malcolm X, a key leader in the Muslims, until a year-and-a-half before his death in 1965 was only evaluated in 1969, but received 27% approving and 35% disapproving. Thirteen per cent rated him excellent. Elijah Muhammad, the Muslim leader received 15% approving to 35% disapproving in 1963; 12% plus

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>2</sup>Army Publication on Sects in America, prepared by the U. S. Army Chaplains School, dated 1972.

<sup>3</sup>Peter Goldman, Report from Black America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), pp. 65-66.

and 43% minus in 1966; and 22% to 40% in 1969. Nine per cent rated him excellent in the 1969 poll.

It seems therefore that Muslims were not very widely received among Blacks in America during the 1960's, but it appears there may have been a slight trend toward wider reception near the end of the decade. Goldman himself says that the poll indicates the Black Muslims "remained frozen where they had been throughout the decade — at the outermost margin of Negro American life".<sup>1</sup>

The extent of the influence of the Black Muslims can be judged also, I feel, by considering the effect on and of some of its well-known members.

There is Eldridge Cleaver. While in prison, he became a Muslim convert, later a Muslim preacher of great conviction, and then a follower of Malcolm X.<sup>2</sup> Cleaver frankly admits his convictions were strongly influenced by Elijah Muhammad's writings for a time, and then later by Malcolm X. He says he felt the real influence was not so much Malcolm, but the truth he spoke, whether it was from a Quaker, a Catholic, or a Seventh-Day Adventist.<sup>3</sup> In a 1970 interview with Gordon Parks in Algiers, Cleaver said, "... We promise to replace racism with racial solidarity...."<sup>4</sup> In the context of

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>2</sup>Eldridge Cleaver, Soul on Ice (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1968), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 57-66.

<sup>4</sup>Gordon Parks, Born Black (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1971), p. 189.

the interview, I feel what he was expressing is in line with the Black Muslim separatist point of view, even though he himself has become a leader of the Black Panthers.

A prominent figure among the Black Muslims is Muhammad Ali. Gordon Parks tells of his personal contact with this champion prize-fighter whom he considers a gentleman. From the interview he gives with Ali in his book, Born Black, there is no doubt of the genuineness of the conviction of Ali in the teachings of the Black Muslims. And the fact he divorced his first wife because she refused to abide by the rules of the faith, and his much publicized draft refusal both point to the strong influence of the Black Muslim teachings on his life.<sup>1</sup>

Without a doubt the most influenced and influential member of the movement before his excommunication and later assassination was Malcolm X, born Malcolm Little. Lincoln calls him the "First Plenipotentiary" of the movement.<sup>2</sup> Such an influence did he have, that even Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, also a Baptist preacher, identified himself to some degree with the Muslims.<sup>3</sup> Malcolm, who was himself the son of a Baptist minister, was a convert from prison, as have been many of the members of the movement. Malcolm was the Messenger's messenger and gave the Muslims a popularity they had not enjoyed before. Malcolm was suspended from speaking for a

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 65-87.

<sup>2</sup>Lincoln, p. 207.

<sup>3</sup>Meier and Rudwick, p. 41.

comment he made after the death of President Kennedy in November of 1963. He withdrew from the Muslims and formed his own organization, The Muslim Mosque, Inc., and its secular counterpart, the Organization of Afro-American Unity.<sup>1</sup> This showed the influence of the Muslim ideology on him, and as the survey above indicates, even after his death his popularity as a leader is felt. His autobiography, published after his death, has been widely read in our society.

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<sup>1</sup>Lincoln, pp. 207-211; also see Draper, pp. 91-93.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

It is my conclusion from this study that Black Nationalism is not a very strong movement within the Black community. It is fragmented by the various organizations which have sprung up during the 1960's such as SNCC, CORE, and the Black Panthers.<sup>1</sup> But it is evident from the lengthy treatment given to the Black Muslims in every discussion of Black Nationalism I could find, including Draper, Ahlstrom, Lomax, and especially Lincoln, that there has been no group more powerful in keeping this idea alive in the Black population of America than the Black Muslims. Draper says:

Whatever fantasy there may be in its Black Nationalism, the Nation of Islam provides a new day-by-day reality for those whom Elijah Muhammad once called "Negroes in the mud," and thus, paradoxically, enables them to live happily and productively in the here and now.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lincoln, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup>Draper, p. 85.



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